

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mike Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

September 30, 2020

Dear Secretary Pompeo,

As recent reports indicate that the Houthis and Yemeni government have recently agreed to engage in a prisoner swap, we write to urge you to encourage that a member of the Jewish community unjustly imprisoned by the Houthis may be included as part of this deal. In particular, we ask that you intercede on behalf of Mr. Libi (Levi) Salem Mousa Marhbi, secure his release from prison, and reunite him with his family.

The Yemeni Jewish community is one of the oldest Jewish communities in the world, dating back nearly 3,000 years. Yemeni Jews have made considerable contributions in the history of Yemen, most notably as renowned artisans and tradesmen. Indeed, following the exile of Mawza in which the Jewish community was banished from Yemen, the country's economy collapsed due to the loss of such an essential community.¹ The Yemeni Jewish community has also persisted in the face of adversity. In the 1940s, following Israel's independence, anti-Semitism against the Yemeni Jewish community resulted in forced conversions and violence, forcing most of the community to look abroad for salvation. Yemen's government granted permission for the Yemeni Jews to emigrate but would not permit them to fly from any Yemeni airstrips. Instead, the community had to fly out of Aden, then controlled by the United Kingdom, and so with little choice, they walked hundreds of miles in a modern exodus. Despite starvation and constant attacks, they succeeded in reaching Aden, where Israel facilitated the airlift of 40,000 Yemeni Jews as part of Operation Magic Carpet.

Today, the remaining Jewish community's position in Yemen is similarly precarious. Following the outbreak of the violence between Houthis and the government of Yemen, many Jews have experienced harassment and persecution at the hands of the Houthis, whose slogan includes, "Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews". Houthi authorities have reportedly imposed arbitrary and oppressive laws on the Jewish community, restricting travel, purchases of certain foods, and forcing Jews to sell their homes to non-Jews.² The State Department's 2019 Human Rights Report on Yemen demonstrated that the community is suffering under the humanitarian catastrophe prevailing throughout the country, while weakened law enforcement capabilities have left them particularly vulnerable to anti-Semitic violence.³

¹ Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper: *The Yemenites. Two Thousand Years of Jewish Culture*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Jerusalem 2000

² Mitchell Stein, "The Last Jews of Yemen," September 5, 2020, <https://www.aish.com/jw/s/The-Last-Jews-of-Yemen.html>

³ "2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Yemen," State Department 2019

Understandably, many Yemeni Jews wish to leave Yemen, and we appreciate your efforts in ensuring that previous flights taking Yemeni Jews out of Yemen were able to transit through Dubai on their way to safety in Israel and the United States. Organizations such as the Sephardic Heritage Museum have also done noble work in assisting in Jewish emigration.

In 2016, a group of Yemeni Jews fled Yemen with the assistance of the Museum and traveled to Israel, bringing with them a rare 800-year-old Torah that was the patrimonial legacy of the community. In response to the successful emigration and the publicity they received upon arrival to Israel, the Houthi authorities in Yemen arrested Levi Marhbi for assisting their emigration. Marhbi has been held in detention for four years on the charges of aiding the departure of a “national Yemeni treasure.”⁴ Since being arrested, Marhbi’s father has died without knowing whether his son will ever be freed. Despite a Yemeni court ordering his release, he is still imprisoned and his family is unable to leave the country, making them some of the last remaining Jews in Yemen.

At a time when the United States is finding success in building bridges between Jewish and Arab peoples, we urge you to engage with the UN Special Envoy on behalf of Levi Marhbi and finally secure his release.

Thank you,



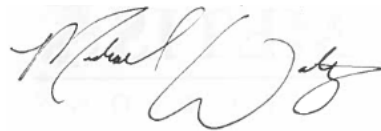
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⁴ Benjamin Weinthal, “US Envoy to Combat Anti-Semitism Urges Houthis to Release Yemeni Jew,” The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com, August 18, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/us-envoy-to-combat-antisemitism-urges-houthis-to-release-yemeni-jews-639007>.



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